



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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GARDEN GOSSIP. No. 3.

IN Bacon's celebrated essay on gardens, his starting idea is that in the "Royal Ordering of Gardens, there ought to be Gardens for all the Months in the Year, in which, severally, things of Beauty may be then in season." This will be hard to compass, a garden for every month in the year; and the varying seasons will not permit of accuracy in any attempt to carry it out. A hard long winter may delay the blooming of the flowers that are destined for March till they are simultaneous with those in the April garden. But if we cannot make sure of a March garden, we may have a spring garden, and the smallest of enclosures will contain a spring bed. Bacon says, "For March, there come Violets, specially the single blue, which are the earliest, the yellow Daffodil, the Daisy, the Almond tree in blossom, the Peach tree in blossom, the Cornelian tree in blossom, Sweet Briar." The Cornelian is the cornus of the ancient poets, famous in mythology; the little yellow flowers, in clusters of ten to twenty, come before the leaves and make fruit in autumn that is red and acorn-shaped. It is a rare tree in England now, brought from Austria three hundred years ago, and in the first twenty years of its age the flowers produce stamens only—hence its name *Cornus mascula*—and so drop without bearing fruit: in later life, bearing plentifully, it is highly ornamental, the fruit hanging long upon the tree. The Crocus, in its many sizes and varied colours, is perhaps the surest flower of March; and it is an early March, or, at latest, a mid-March flower. Many sorts bloom well under large deciduous trees, getting their three months' life in the open air well over before the trees are dressed for summer in their thick green mantles; for the nine months' life underground, what matters it whether shade or shine prevails above? In my garden is a little shady walk, planted on either side with Winter Aconites and large yellow Crocuses interspersed. I am not sure that the Winter Aconites are going to thrive this year; the Crocuses seem too many for them, and they do not increase as they should. Then there are the Violets, of which, as Bacon says truly, the blue ones come earliest and the white ones later. Violets, I always think, are for gathering, and so are not the real garden

flowers—not the flowers that make the garden gay—and so I would always put them in little-noticed or out-of-the-way places: spots one knows of to go and gather from, leaving conspicuous parts for larger, brighter beauties. Many people grow them in frames, getting them earlier and finer thus. In a friend's garden where there are several large frames devoted to the best sorts, there was last year one particular frame excelling all the others in number and size of blooms. My friend told me the secret: she had watched over that one herself, and taken off every runner as it formed, and so the work of the mistress was better rewarded—perhaps because better performed—than that of the gardeners. Except for its scent, the Violet is an overrated flower, and its scent is most fugitive; the reason, I suppose, that it is so highly valued.

Shakespeare says that "Daffodils take the winds of March with beauty," but in northern gardens April is the true month of Daffodils; then they come in lovely multitudes, dwarfs and giants, white and every shade of yellow, and the Poet's Narcissus, or Pheasant's Eye, last of all, with the cup red bordered. Like unto the true *Narcissus poeticus* is the variety *Narcissus ornatus*, exactly like the other one but quite a month earlier and I think more freely blooming. *Narcissus poeticus* multiplies fast and gets itself into dense clumps of bulbs too crowded to flower; then they must be split up—a lengthy operation—the large bulbs among them planted where they will perhaps all of them flower next year, and the smaller ones in another place according to size, for they may not bloom for two or three years. *Narcissus ornatus* has not with me acted in this manner: it has been more staple and given far less trouble; but I like to have the two sorts—it is like having two seasons of the one thing. But all this will be in April. I must return to March. Bacon's list contains the Daisy. Does he mean the double forms that are red or white or a mixture—the Garden Daisies? They have never had a place in my garden. The one I should like to have, which one sometimes sees in old cottage gardens, is the Hen and Chicken Daisy. Its flower is a large daisy such as one sees in the grass, and out from this large flower are growing a number of miniature flowers, each as perfect in all its parts as is the larger mother bloom. Bacon's list is too early, for April is the month of Garden Daisies; the wild ones do not keep themselves to March, but bloom at any time when there

is warmth and sun—December or January even are not without them in mild winters. There is an old saying that spring has not really come till the human foot can be planted on nine Daisies at once.

Chaucer, the old poet, dwells often upon the Day's eye—the true name—the eye that opens with the dawn and closes regularly every evening; the white ray florets draw together to form a tent over the yellow disk, bringing their red-tipped ends to a point, and showing all the crimson of the under side that is generally turned towards the earth. Chaucer describes himself daily rising in the May mornings to see this opening sight and do it reverence. He says it softens all his sorrows, and regrets that his English prose or rhyme are insufficient to do it honour.

How few people see the fruit of the Daisy; yet it has fruit and abundant seed on the beautiful little green cone that is left when the fruit is shed. There is an old saying that has two forms: "One year's seed is five years' weed," and "One year's seed is seven years' weed." It is the latter that is true of Daisy seed at least. I once kept a lawn free from Daisies, and a badly daisied lawn it was at first, for five years, and still at the end the little plants were coming into being thick and fast. As no plant was suffered to flower there in that time, it must have been that the earth was full of old seed. What would Chaucer have said of such treatment of the flower of all flowers he delighted to honour!

The Almonds are the most delightful of the early flowering trees, and there are several of them. The white flowers tinged with pink on the leafless boughs against a blue sky, are more exquisite even than the pure white blossoms of the Wild Cherry of the woods. There is the Bitter Almond and the Sweet Almond and the double one, whose flowers last long. The Dwarf Almond—a shrub with linear leaves and solitary flowers that are red or white or sometimes double—is well placed in the herbaceous border. Along with these should not be missed the double-blossomed Cherry, of which it has been said that it wants but scent to rival the White Rose. It is a tree of uncommon interest to the physiologist, since at the centre of the flower the ovary is to be found in the shape of two minute green leaves. The Peach tree is of the same family, but not, I think, so worthy of the garden as the others; it is merely a fruit tree needing a warmer land.

Why Bacon should conclude his March flowers with the Sweet Briar, I cannot tell. Its charm is in the deliciously aromatic scent of the leaves—an odour emitted from the tiny glands on their edges and under sides. This makes it a pleasant companion in the garden from the time of the buds bursting in spring until the flowers come in June, and onwards till the leaves fall and the brilliant berries take their place. It goes well in a mixed hedge, and so takes part in the structure of the garden.

As March comes in the multitudinous Snowdrops will be well nigh over; they often make their greatest display in their last days: the flowers are opened wider than ever before and look whiter than ever. I have known them last all through a late March and fit for use in the church on Easter Day. But if they are gone there is something to follow, quite as good, sometimes called the Giant Snowdrop, really the Spring Snowflake, *Leucojum vernum*. These are fragrant drooping flowers just like Snowdrops, only much larger, with green spots at the petal tips—green spots that turn yellow as the flower grows older and so reveal its age; the flowers are on taller, stronger stems, and the foliage is as much larger as are the flowers. This is one of the choicest treasures of the early spring; when it is firmly established it flowers abundantly and multiplies. It happens to thrive in my garden amazingly. I have often given it away, but I have not heard that it has been equally successful elsewhere. There is a later flower of the same genus—Summer Snowflake, *Leucojum aestivum*—not nearly so attractive; it comes in May, of taller growth, with less profuse and smaller flowers.

There are early Primroses, too, in March—some of the Himalayan ones, such as *Primula verticillata*—which are very hardy, and, in my opinion, indispensable; pale lavender balls of flowers haunted by butterflies of gayer colour; they are very sure, very profuse, and multiply. A friend gave me a plant some ten years ago; at once it was divided into five, and two years later it was split up into many. Every second year its bosses are too big if not reduced; and so treated, it has gone to many places and must have become at least a hundred by this time. It is my experience that given plants thrive better than bought plants, and for reasons; but that is too long a screed to tack on to the end of a spring paper.

SOPHIA ARMITT.